Meeting the San youth – Ethical issues and researchers positions

The paper focuses on the Participatory Development with the Youth project, which is an international and inter-sectoral research focusing on San young people living in indigenous communities in Southern Africa. Professor Satu Miettinen from the University of Lapland coordinates the project and the Horizon 2020 funds it. The project aims to endorse human development and assist in reducing youth unemployment by increasing the involvement and inclusion of young people in service development in South Africa and Namibia by using participatory and explorative service design tools. The project focuses on San youth and young adults (13–24 years of age), especially living in poor or otherwise marginal conditions who either are or face the risk of becoming marginalized.

Our data consists of the photographs, ethnographical notes and interviews we collected in a workshop held in 2016 in Khwattu, the cultural centre for San people in South Africa. The workshop focused on the discussions of education, study curriculum, life skills and work exposures. We also considered how San young people make decisions about their future and how they could influence upon their communities. These discussion where loaded with the complex dynamics of power and ethics and raised up the questions of voice. The voices heard in the workshop are pervasive, multiple and diverse. Though we claim to build a trustworthy and safe space for conversation, we have to ask whether we hear all voices; and using terms like safe and trust force us to interrogate the meanings of these terms in our research processes. In the paper we ask, what kinds of ethical questions we should ask when researching “otherness” and indigenous cultures. What kind of challenges arouse when the researchers try to hear the San youth voices?

We claim, first, that when studying the “otherness” and young people´s voices, researchers should use specific methodological tools, which provide space to listen and see things through others. The significant concern is to reflect the researchers’ positions and pay attention on how they encounter the examinees. Second, we argue that voices are expressions of identities, used in a political sense and reflecting power. All of the voices and actions in research situations are political, as they affect the lives of participants and their concepts of themselves. We as researchers should consider threats and respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy throughout the study process and beyond.